

Wilderness Stewardship in the National Park System

Stewarding the wilderness resource is more than managing it. It is ensuring its existence through helping others to understand, use, and appreciate it. It is ensuring its physical and philosophical protection. Given the importance of wilderness as an anchor point of the land use spectrum, and its historical, scientific, recreational, philosophical, and spiritual significance, wilderness stewardship needs to be a shared concept among park staff, visitors, neighbors, and partners.

It is important to explicitly state the principles of wilderness stewardship. These principles are embedded within NPS Management Policies, Director's Order 41, and Reference Manual 41, all addressing Wilderness Preservation and Management. They are also reflected in the multidisciplinary National Wilderness Steering Committee of the National Park Service, and the Interagency Wilderness Policy Council where the NPS is joined by representatives of the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S.G.S. Biological Research Division. However, only by explicitly stating these principles can they be shared:

Adherence to the Wilderness Act: The most fundamental principle is adherence to the letter and spirit of the Wilderness Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and park wilderness authorizing legislation. Adherence to the precepts and philosophy of the Wilderness Act is a requirement of the law and the laws establishing individual wilderness areas.

One National Wilderness System: The Wilderness Act established one National Wilderness Preservation System made up of the wilderness areas managed by four federal land management systems. This requires ever-increasing coordination and cooperation among the four agencies because even though the National Wilderness Preservation System reflects unique population and physiographic differences across the country, local day-to-day management actions may set precedents that could affect wilderness stewardship across all agencies.

A Special Place: Wilderness needs to be managed as a composite, as one resource, not a collection of individual pieces. It is more than natural or cultural resources management, visitor use management, or resource protection. It requires unique planning and stewardship, close attention to the condition of the resource and how it changes over time, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Science Informed: Science should inform wilderness stewardship as more is learned about ecological systems, individual species and their habitats, human behavior and the success and failures of various policies and management activities. Science may facilitate our understanding of how to correct human-caused perturbations in natural systems, of how to use and enjoy these areas without destroying them, and of how valuable these areas are to people.

Logically Planned: Wilderness will only be sustained through careful thought and planning. Plans are compacts with the public about how lands are to be treated and what values are to be served. It is essential to use the planning process to determine what is to be sustained, to devise a program to sustain it, and to address the implementation and evaluation of this program.

Public Transparency: Central to the intent of the Wilderness Act is that public transparency applies to all aspects of wilderness stewardship. Policies, plans and management activities, the findings from monitoring and evaluation, and research results need to be understandable and readily available to the public.

Non-degradation: Congress recognized that naturalness, wildness, solitude, and the other characteristics of wilderness vary within and across wilderness areas. Expectations and standards can change with the condition of the surrounding areas. The concept of non-degradation addresses this situation. It calls for the maintenance of existing environmental conditions if they equal or exceed minimum standards, and for the restoration of conditions that are below minimum levels. The objectives are to maintain current high standards, to prevent further degradation, and to restore below minimum conditions to acceptable levels.

Preservation of Wilderness Character: The Wilderness Act clearly calls for the preservation of wilderness character. This suggests the maintenance of a degree of naturalness that is not inherent in many other land categories and a degree of wildness that is found nowhere else. Efforts must be made to ensure the special nature of wilderness and to ensure that it is recognizable as such. This includes protecting threatened sites, eliminating damaging activities, applying minimum regulations and tools, and carefully managing human influences.

Protecting Wildness: Wildness is a fundamental characteristic of wilderness that needs to be protected since it may not be attainable elsewhere. Such protection recognizes and celebrates the value of wild animals and plants, and of earth phenomena such as landslides, fires, and floods. It recognizes that modern humans are visitors to such places, and they should leave no permanent trace, ensuring that wilderness remains wild for others to experience.

Accountability: Stewardship means being accountable and responsible for management actions. To acknowledge what has been done, to monitor what has influenced a resource, and to review the character of wilderness are part of knowing the effectiveness of wilderness stewardship.

Ensuring the Stewardship of the National Wilderness Preservation System, Executive Summary

Pinchot Institute for Conservation, September, 2001

America has pioneered many important concepts regarding protection of lands and our national heritage. The passage of the Wilderness Act (PL 88-577) in 1964 created the **National Wilderness Preservation System**, and signaled a commitment to protect in perpetuity a portion of our landscape and its related human heritage. However, to accomplish this requires active stewardship in the face of population growth and environmental change. Active stewardship of the Wilderness System requires that the four Federal agencies that manage portions of the Wilderness System cooperate and collaborate.¹ It requires that they do the best that they can for the land within the limits of their technical and financial resources.

Wilderness management coordinators in the four Federal agencies recognize that improvements are needed in the stewardship of the Wilderness System to sustain it unimpaired into the new century. In 1999, they asked the **Pinchot Institute for Conservation** to empanel a diverse group of individuals from outside of government to examine our stewardship of Wilderness over the past 35 years and to recommend how we might be better stewards in the 21st century. This report speaks to the issues of stewarding the National Wilderness Preservation System of the United States, an idea that is truly American in origin, but that has caught the attention of people around the world. As this report is released, 37 years after the passage of the Wilderness Act, we find that the Wilderness System has grown from 10 million acres in 54 units to nearly 105 million acres in over 600 units. We find also that the National Wilderness Preservation System is more important to the American people than ever before.

The fundamental conclusion of this report is that there is **a need to forge an integrated and collaborative system across the four wilderness management agencies**. Given the importance of wilderness as part of a land use spectrum, its historical, scientific, recreational, philosophical, and spiritual significance, and the lack of a truly systematic approach to protecting and managing Wilderness, the report offers an agenda and specific recommendations to the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior, the officials designated in the Wilderness Act as primarily responsible for guaranteeing an enduring resource of wilderness.

When an area is designated by Congress as Wilderness, there are myriad responsibilities to maintain and enhance the wilderness character. Many management actions are necessary simply to protect the resource from degradation. Yet the essential character of Wilderness is to be “untrammeled by man,” and many scholars and managers regard “stewardship” as the most appropriate perspective for safeguarding these unique resources in the future. Therefore, this report emphasizes the term wilderness stewardship, rather than wilderness management. Stewardship implies working with Nature to perpetuate wilderness for the future, and any actions to be taken need to be considered from a diversity of philosophical, legal, and technical perspectives.

The Wilderness System is growing in size and complexity, and our understanding of the system is broadening. There are examples suggesting that this growing complexity is understood among the agencies’ leaders in wilderness stewardship, but many other examples that suggest it is not. There are issues that exemplify some contemporary dilemmas of stewardship. One of these is ensuring both naturalness and wildness; another is recognizing that wilderness is not isolated from the surrounding landscape. Manipulating wilderness conditions is philosophically and practically problematic, and how we define minimum requirements is important in selecting actions and tools to use. The place of recreational use in the broader spectrum of wilderness values has not been

made particularly clear. Agency organization and commitment to stewardship are needed for success, but in many instances they seem lacking. Effectively utilizing modern information technologies to maximize the value of Wilderness and minimize degradation is a major new opportunity. Each of these issues presents significant challenges for how we steward wilderness for the future.

To enable land management agencies to meet the challenges, some principles for stewardship would be very useful, and the following eight are offered for consideration:

- **Adhering to the Wilderness Act is a fundamental principle for wilderness stewardship in the U.S.**
- **U.S. wilderness is to be treated as a system of wildernesses.**
- **Wildernesses are special places and are to be treated as special.**
- **Stewardship should be science-informed, logically planned, and publicly transparent.**
- **Non-degradation of wilderness fundamentally should guide stewardship activities.**
- **Preservation of wilderness character is a guiding idea of the Wilderness Act.**
- **Recognizing the wild in wilderness distinguishes wilderness from most other land classes.**
- **Accountability is basic to sound stewardship.**

In shaping the future for success in wilderness stewardship, there are several things that the wilderness agencies should do. Implementing these recommendations will assist the Secretaries and the agencies under their purview to better steward our wilderness resources.

The four wilderness agencies and their leaders must make a strong commitment to wilderness stewardship before the Wilderness System is lost.

- **The four wilderness agencies must organize to maximize stewardship effectiveness and to develop a fully integrated stewardship system across the Wilderness System.**
- **Wilderness planning must be accelerated to help guide stewardship activities, to enhance opportunities for evaluation and accountability, and to increase the probability that the Wilderness System will be sustained.**
- **Science, education, and training programs should be enhanced and focused to provide information, professional expertise, and public support for wilderness stewardship.**
- **The four wilderness agencies should create wilderness stewardship positions and career opportunities at all levels and commit adequate financial resources for stewardship and support of wilderness.**
- **Accountability for the maintenance and sustainability of the Wilderness System must be embraced by the four wilderness agencies.**

It is possible to move forward and ensure a National Wilderness Preservation System for the future. It will require building an integrated, collaborative system across the two departments and the four wilderness agencies. To manage the wilderness as a system means that each area is a part of a whole, no matter which agency administers it. It means that all wildernesses are subject to a common set of guidelines, and thus requires that such guidelines be developed.

There exist today several system-oriented institutions that can be used to move administration and stewardship of wilderness toward becoming an integrated system. The relatively new Wilderness Policy Council of the four wilderness agencies and the U.S.

Geological Survey is one of these. It could be an important body for discussion of leading issues and for making recommendations to the agencies and the secretaries.

The **Wilderness Information Network** (www.wilderness.net) is a tool for compiling and disseminating information about wilderness over the Internet. It draws together the information developed by stewards of individual wildernesses, research by federal agencies, university professors and others, information disseminated in periodicals and other media, and information from groups that care about wilderness stewardship. The **Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center** and the **Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute** are interagency organizations designed to bridge the training and research needs of the four wilderness stewardship agencies.

Collaborative and cooperative activities among federal agencies in Alaska, also are instructive for illustrating possibilities. The Alaska Cooperative Planning Group, the Alaska Issues Group, the Alaska Land Manager's Forum, and the Alaska Public Lands Information Center all are institutions that demonstrate that integrative, collaborative stewardship might be possible.

Combining strong leadership from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, from the agency heads and their staffs, and the efforts of dedicated wilderness stewards and advocates, the potential exists for bringing all of the pieces together to ensure the continued integrity of the Wilderness System. To this end, **four specific recommendations are offered for consideration by the Secretaries and others responsible for ensuring a continuing resource of wilderness:**

- **The Secretaries should issue joint policies and regulations specifying common interpretations of law, and thus provide broad guidelines for the stewardship of wilderness.**
- **The Secretaries should devise an organizational structure to make stewardship happen across the agencies so that a high quality wilderness system is continued in perpetuity.**
- **The Secretaries should devise monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that we know how well wildernesses are being stewarded, especially in the context of a system of wildernesses, and they should reinstitute regular reporting of the state of the system.**
- **The Secretaries should develop a means for informing the American people about the National Wilderness Preservation System and about their wilderness heritage.**

It is the view of this panel that implementing these recommendations, and the framework for action prescribed in this report, can lead to more effective stewardship and development of a National Wilderness Preservation System, and ensure that it continues to be a world treasure in centuries to come.

¹ Portions of the National Wilderness Preservation System are managed by the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (all in the Department of the Interior), and the US Forest Service (in the U.S. Department of Agriculture).

This full report is included on the Celebrate Wilderness! CD-ROM that is part of the NPS Wilderness Education and Interpretation Resource Notebook. To view the report on-line, go to www.pinchot.org (49 Pages PDF 125.5 KB).

